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SUBJECT: CYPRUS: THE DEVELOPMENT AND EXERCISE OF AVIAN AND PANDEMIC
INFLUENZA RESPONSE PLANS

REF: A) STATE 22992 B) 06 Nicosia 242 and previous

(U) This cable is sensitive but unclassified. Please treat accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Both the Government of Cyprus and the Turkish Cypriot administration are much better prepared to deal with a major AI outbreak than they were in January 2006 when two chickens in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots tested positive for H5N1. Both sides have recently tested their AI response plans (the GoC in October and the Turkish Cypriot administration in December). With Cyprus falling on the path of two main bird migration routes, both sides are taking the threat seriously. The main weakness continues to be the lack of cooperation across the UN-patrolled Green Line, separating the two communities. While both communities recently agreed to participate in a USAID-financed, UNDP-led bicomunal animal disease working group -- this inchoate cooperation is very fragile and yet to be tested in practice. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (SBU) Both the Government of Cyprus and the Turkish Cypriot administration are taking the AI threat seriously. (Note: Cyprus has been divided since 1974 into the government-controlled, primarily Greek Cypriot south and the predominantly Turkish Cypriot north. The U.S. and all other countries except Turkey recognize only the Government of Cyprus. The two communities are separated by a UN-patrolled buffer zone called the Green Line. End note). Both communities have prepared and tested AI veterinary and health response plans (see below).

¶3. (SBU) A key catalyst for both sides to improve their response plans was the AI scare that hit the Turkish Cypriot community in January 2006 when two chickens tested positive for H5N1 in a backyard farm in a small Turkish Cypriot village near the Green Line (ref b). Since the 10 km surveillance zone cut across the Green Line into the south and into one of the UK's military bases -- the incident required some form of cooperation from all four administrations on the island -- GoC, Turkish Cypriot, UN and UK.

¶4. (SBU) Typical of the lack of trust between the two communities, both sides remember the incident very differently. The Turkish Cypriots see it as a real case of AI that was quickly contained and

isolated due to their hard work and quick response. The GoC, however, believes because other birds in close proximity were not affected and the strain found was identical to that prevalent at the time in Eastern Turkey, there was no AI outbreak in Cyprus. Rather, the GoC believes that the Turkish Cypriot samples were inadvertently contaminated in Turkey en route to the UK Weybridge laboratory. Visiting EU veterinary experts have suggested to us that contamination is probably the most likely scenario, but a real AI outbreak cannot be ruled out. Since the GoC is regarded by the international community as the sovereign government of the entire island and it believes the samples were contaminated -- no AI outbreak on Cyprus has ever been reported to the WHO or OIE. Six months after the scare, the GoC sent a diplomatic note to all Embassies resident in Cyprus informing them it was the GoC position that no H5N1 had been found in any birds or humans on the island.

Government-controlled area

15. (SBU) EU rules require the GoC to have a national AI response plan and to conduct regular exercises. We sent the department last year an English version of the veterinary part of the plan. For another copy, please contact EconOff Mike Dixon at DixonMS@State.gov. The health portion in Greek is available at:

<http://www.moh.gov.cy/MOH/moh.nsf/All/4CCD90ECED95DD174225718800218F00?OpenDocument> (with no breaks)

A very short synopsis of the health plan in English is available at:

<http://www.moh.gov.cy/MOH/moh.nsf/All/9914FB742F8A35D84225718700530986?OpenDocument> (with no breaks)

16. (SBU) The GoC Veterinary Service organized a field exercise

October 9-11, 2006, that involved the culling of over 4,000 chickens. The scenario involved an outbreak at an actual chicken farm near Nicosia and two secondary outbreaks in the Limassol and Larnaca districts. Participants in the exercise included: the Veterinary Service, Police, Civil Defense, Fire Department, Forestry Department, the Games Fund, the Meteorological services, Medical Services and several private poultry farms. Three individuals from the Turkish Cypriot "veterinary service" participated as observers.

17. (SBU) Observers from the UNDP called the event a success noting that the GOC had demonstrated the ability at short notice to confirm an outbreak, mobilize the resources and staff required to respond, implement an exclusion and surveillance zone, establish a local disease control center and coordinate between a wide range of stakeholders. Head of the GoC Veterinary Service Giorgos Neophytou also termed the exercise a success. He noted to us, however, that the exercise had exposed a weakness in their response to secondary outbreaks. While everyone was quick to throw resources at the site of the initial outbreak, their response to the secondary outbreaks was much slower and more limited. The Veterinary Service was preparing protocols to correct this. While the Veterinary Service had prepared a short internal report for the Minister, no report on the exercise was available to the public. The UNDP's main recommendation was to point out the need for a bicomunal exercise requiring actual cooperation between the two communities.

18. (SBU) Neophytou reported that they were planning to hold a surprise drill in the near future and expected to be invited to join an EU table top exercise in Brussels later this spring. The GoC also hoped to host an international veterinary seminar on AI as well, although this was still in the early planning stages. Ministry of Health AI POC Chrystalla Hadjianastasiou reported that the Ministry of Health had also participated in an EU-wide table top exercise in November 2005.

Area administered by Turkish Cypriots

19. (SBU) The Turkish Cypriot authorities established an inter-agency Avian Influenza Monitoring Committee under the "Prime Minister's Office" and prepared an AI response plan based on the GoC plan following joint demarches by the U.S., UK and EU. We sent English language versions of the health and veterinary contingency plans to

OES and EUR/SE last year. To request another copy please contact EconOff Mike Dixon at DixonMS@state.gov.

¶10. (SBU) Turkish Cypriot "Chief Veterinary Officer" Ersun Korudag recently told us that the chicken farms were well regulated. His greatest concern regarded the two or three chickens many village families keep in their back yards. Consequently, the "veterinary service" was aggressively enforcing rules that required all poultry, poultry feed and water to be kept enclosed to prevent any contamination from migratory birds. The service had also drafted a very detailed AI veterinary implementation plan that included specific information on every village and poultry farm.

¶11. (SBU) According to Korudag, the Turkish Cypriot's main exercise to date was the suspected outbreak in January 2006 (see above), that forced a real life response, including the establishment of exclusion and surveillance zones and the culling of dozens of poultry. To practice what they had learned, the Turkish Cypriot "veterinary service" organized a follow-up AI exercise December 21-22, 2006. The first day consisted of classroom lectures. The second day a field exercise based on the scenario that a large number of chickens suddenly died at a small chicken farm near Ercan airport. Representatives of the Turkish Cypriot "veterinary service," police, "ministry of health" and "civil defense" all played prominent roles in quickly identifying the outbreak and setting up the exclusion and surveillance zones. Three GoC veterinary officials were set to participate as observers, but withdrew, however, when they received official invitations on "TRNC" letterhead.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Both Communities appear well set to handle relatively small outbreaks that occur exclusively within their area of

effective control. Multiple simultaneous outbreaks or outbreaks that straddle the UN-patrolled buffer zone, however, would challenge either side and especially the Turkish Cypriot community where resources are more limited (although the area and population is much smaller). A critical gap remains the inability of the two sides to cooperate during any emergency. Turkish Cypriot participation in the GoC exercise and the commitment of both sides to participate in the USAID-funded, UNDP-led bicomunal animal disease working group are both positive steps forward. This limited cooperation, however, has been extremely difficult to obtain, is untested, and is very fragile. We will continue to advocate for closer AI coordination and urge future bicomunal exercises to test both sides readiness to deal with what could be a major threat to the health and well-being of their citizens.

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